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IS OUR NAVAL ADMINISTRATION EFFICIENT?

BY REAR-ADMIRAL GEORGE W. MELVILLE, U.S.N. (RETIRED).

It is now just twenty-five years since the beginning of our "New Navy." In that time the total expenditure for all naval purposes, including new construction, repairs, maintenance and operation, Navy-yards, and personnel, has been, in round numbers, \$1,250,000,000, or an average of about \$50,000,000 a year: at the present time we are spending about \$100,000,000 a year. It is, therefore, a matter of vital interest to every good citizen to know whether our naval administration is efficient and economical.

With the steady increase in the number of fine armored vessels, and the widely advertised improvement in gunnery and fleet drill, it is probable that, until about a year ago, the average layman who reads about naval affairs believed quite thoroughly that we had a fine Navy and that its administration was efficient and praiseworthy. He was all the more justified in this because all the experts, at home and abroad, were united in assigning our fleet a rank second only to Great Britain's huge navy. About a year ago, there was a bitter attack upon the design and effectiveness of our ships and also upon our naval administration, and this has been followed by articles of a similar tenor in the daily press, and finally by a discussion in this REVIEW of naval administration by a distinguished Admiral on the retired list, who takes the ground that the system followed since 1862 is wrong and must be changed to secure efficiency.

When so many writers, anonymous and open, are making such charges, it is possible that the owners of the Navy, our whole body of taxpayers, may begin to believe them unless the other side of the case is presented—and there is, most decidedly, an-

other side. I have hesitated to take upon me the exposition of the facts, as I see them, because my active work in the Navy is over. On the other hand, I had such a long and intimate knowledge of the existing plan of naval administration through my service for sixteen years as Chief of the Bureau of Steam Engineering and, therefore, a part of the administration, that it seems very appropriate that I should discuss the question and reassure, if it is necessary, our taxpayers that the liberal sums they are spending on the Navy are being used wisely and efficiently. This service lasted from 1887 to 1903, under Presidents Cleveland, Harrison, McKinley and Roosevelt. Let me add, also, that I was responsible for the machinery of all the battle-ships of the Atlantic Fleet as it started out on its tour of the world, all having been designed during my incumbency.

I have designedly referred to the taxpayers of the country as the owners of the Navy, because I wish to call attention to a feature of naval administration which is, in my judgment, of vital importance but which is often forgotten—I mean the Naval Committees of the Senate and House. Congress is really the Board of Directors of the great corporation composed of the taxpayers, and the Committees correspond quite accurately to the Executive Committee of the Directors of a Company. They confer with the executives upon details, and, on their recommendation, Congress (as the whole Board) makes appropriations, changes organization, etc. Now, if the entire personnel of Congress were changed every two years, the members of the Committees would have to depend very largely upon the officials of the Navy Department for their knowledge of naval matters, although this would only mean that they would have to give much harder study to the problems presented than they now do. In fact, however, there is no such change, and some of the members were legislating for the Navy at a time when some of the loudest critics were still schoolboys. The country and the Navy are indeed fortunate in the present Chairmen of the two Committees, Senator Hale and Representative Foss. Not only have they spent years in this work, but they have made independent studies of naval affairs, so that it is safe to say that they are among the foremost experts in naval matters in the world. It is very important to have in mind the function of these Committees in their constant supervision of naval matters, and that so many of the

members have exercised it continuously for years. They come to have a pride even greater than that of the average citizen in the Navy because they can really make or unmake it, and they can justly feel that to a great extent it is their creation. This means that important events in the Navy do not occur by chance, and, above all, that naval administration has not come to its present condition without the knowledge of Congress. Indeed, the exact nature of the system is brought prominently before the Committees at every session, when the Secretary, each Chief of Bureau and often other officers, are called to explain and discuss estimates for appropriations and other matters of importance.

It would seem that this is all so elementary as to be commonplace, but sometimes it is necessary to consider elementary things in order to put matters in a clear light. My object is to point out who are finally responsible for the system of naval administration, and particularly that they are thoroughly able, through long experience and familiarity, to judge of the merits and demerits of the existing system and of any other which may be suggested as a substitute.

I believe any man whose mental calibre is sufficient to make him a reader of this REVIEW, will be enough of an evolutionist to believe and to realize that so complicated a machine as a modern battleship is a development, and that no man, however able, could by any possibility design one which in every respect was so novel as to be unlike anything which preceded it. So true is this, indeed, that improvements are only made a step at a time, and one class passes gradually into the next. Even such a change as that to the "all big-gun, one-calibre" ship which seems so radical is, after all, as has been clearly pointed out by one of our young Constructors, only an enlargement of the double-turreted monitors, the new ships having ten big guns in five turrets against their four guns in two turrets.* The introduction and development of improvements of any kind are most carefully noted all over the world, and, on the essential points—such as position and thickness of belt armor, calibre and location of guns, type and size of machinery, speed, etc.—there is substantial agreement among the designers of all navies. This was shown very clearly by the

* One vessel, the wooden "razeed" frigate "Roanoke," was fitted with three turrets, each having two 15-inch guns. But the weight was too great for the old wooden hull, and she sagged so badly that she was used only as a harbor defence ship in Chesapeake Bay.

Chief Constructor of the Navy, in the diagrams which he submitted to the Naval Committee of the Senate comparing the battleships of all the important navies class by class. This comparison showed that our ships were in no respect inferior, and in some respects they were superior, to those of other nations.*

In other words, the existing system of naval administration has, to speak only of the present, produced a fleet which is recognized by experts all over the world as ranking in the highest class as to quality of *materiel*, and we have the trip around the world to testify to the efficiency of the *personnel*, even if we had not also the enthusiastic statement of the Commander-in-Chief, on the arrival in San Francisco, that everything was in better shape than when the start was made from Hampton Roads, and that the fleet was in the finest condition to perform any duty that might occur, whether fighting or otherwise.

As further indicative of the efficiency of the existing system of naval administration, it is only necessary to call attention to the fact that this system prevailed during the Civil War and the war with Spain. Certainly, an inefficient system could never have led to the triumphant success which occurred in both those wars.

All this is not my opinion, but only a plain record of facts which are well known to all who keep in touch with naval affairs. If, then, the existing system of naval administration gives us a fleet, highly efficient both in *personnel* and *materiel*, what is wrong with it and why should it be changed? It seems to me that it is incumbent on those who desire a change to show real defects due to it—which they do not attempt. What they do is to set up a man of straw and then knock him over. The recent article in this REVIEW talked as if the policy of the Navy Department were settled by a majority vote of the eight Bureau Chiefs, and because, for a short period, three of them were line officers and five staff, that this caused questions of tactics, ordnance, etc., to be settled by men who knew little or nothing about them. Nothing could possibly be wider of the mark. I cannot remem-

* Since this was written, the results of the "Newport Conference" of last summer have been published so far as relates to criticisms of the designs of our "all big-gun, one-calibre" ships. This Conference was composed of over seventy-five per cent. line officers. By an overwhelming majority, they found all the criticisms without serious foundation and heartily endorsed the work of the Bureaus dealing with *materiel*.

ber, in my sixteen years of service as Chief of a Bureau, that the eight Bureau Chiefs were ever called together as a body to discuss or settle anything. I can testify that my opinion was never asked on matters of navigation or strategy, and I certainly never offered any suggestions on such subjects to the Secretary or any other official. It was not my work. I attended to my own duties and, as a rule, every other Bureau Chief attended to his, each keeping clear of the other's work. Any exceptions that occurred were due not to the system but to individual ambition, and that restlessness which seems to drive some people into the affairs of others.*

The recent article in the REVIEW had this statement: "The five non-combatant Admirals naturally regard questions of naval efficiency from the non-military point of view; the Admirals of the combatant class from the military point of view." This presents the same curious attitude towards an important body of naval officers which has been characteristic of a certain class for many years. How any man who is on a ship in line of battle, taking his chances of being destroyed, can be a "non-combatant" is hard to see. The assumption, of course, is that a man who is not actually shooting a gun has no personal interest in the outcome of the fight. This, of course, is absurd and, as a matter of fact, the distinction which it is attempted to draw and the depreciation of brother officers is most unwarranted. The article also attributes to those so-called "non-combatant and non-military" Admirals a tremendous influence with Congress, so great, indeed, as to be able to override the wishes of the President and the Secretary of the Navy. To any one who has spent his life in the Navy, as I have, this is really little short of comical. A request which the staff officers, of whom these "non-combatant and non-military" Admirals are the head, have repeatedly made has been that they receive recognition of the fact that they are members of the military organization by having, in addition to their professional titles, titles indicating their grade in the organization. Notwithstanding their alleged enormous influence, which can over-

* This is with respect to matters of general naval policy. As far as general design of *materiel* is concerned, this is under the general supervision of the Board of Construction, which is composed of the chiefs or representatives of the Bureaus of Ordnance, Equipment, Navigation, Construction and Repair, and Steam Engineering. Up to 1899, this meant three line and two staff officers. When the engineers became line officers, it made the proportion four line to one staff.

ride the wishes of the President, they have not been able to secure this relatively small right.

As an actual matter of fact, I feel quite confident that the staff officers of the Navy, if asked for their candid opinion, would say that the most influential naval officer by far is the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. That official is charged with the general administration of affairs connected with the *personnel* and the movement of the fleet. All orders assigning officers to duty are made out in his Bureau and under his supervision; and, although the courtesy is paid the staff Bureaus of having their Chiefs nominate their officers for duty, the actual preparation of the orders is carried out by the Bureau of Navigation, and the Chief of that Bureau in this way does exercise a very real supervision over the entire *personnel* of the Navy. Further than this, from the very nature of his duties, he is brought into much closer touch with the Secretary than any other Bureau Chief, so that, assuming his natural ability to be anywhere near that of most of the incumbents of that office, it is inevitable that he will become the Secretary's closest adviser and the one on whom he relies more than any other. Chiefs of the other Bureaus are, as a rule, consulted only about their own specialties and come in touch with the Secretary with respect to them, while the Chief of Navigation has such an exceedingly broad scope of work that he not only is supreme in this work, but is extremely likely to be the trusted confidential adviser of the Secretary in all matters.

As showing the great power of the Chief of Navigation, those who are familiar with naval affairs will remember the controversy, somewhat over a year ago, about the command of a hospital ship. The Chief of Navigation at the time opposed the decision of the President to place a surgeon in command of this ship so strongly that he absolutely refused to issue the order, although he knew it was the President's desire, and finally resigned his office rather than issue the order when he received a positive order from the President to do so. It was a rather curious commentary on naval discipline that the officer who, under the Secretary, is specially charged with the maintenance of discipline, should himself refuse to obey an order of the Commander-in-Chief.

There is a further aspect to this matter of the influence exerted on the Secretary and on Congress by naval officers. From

the very nature of things, the number of officers of high rank in the line of the Navy on the active list greatly exceeds that in the other branches of the service. In Washington at the present time there are, in addition, about thirty retired Rear-Admirals. Cultured and agreeable men of the world as they are, and holding a high social as well as official position, these men exert an enormous influence. To assume for a moment that the small contingent of so-called "non-combatant and non-military" Admirals could outweigh the influence of this large body of distinguished men, so as to persuade Congress to turn down a desirable proposition which had the recommendation of the President and the Secretary of the Navy, is to my mind the most absurd thing in the world.

The real reason for the failure of the effort to change the organization of the Navy Department is not the opposition of the "non-military" Bureau Chiefs. I am not in their counsels and do not know what they have done, although, knowing some of them intimately, I doubt very decidedly if they have ever made any effort against it. The movement for a change has failed, as it ought, because its authors have not been able to persuade the Naval Committees that the change is desirable. My long service brought me frequently before these Committees, and I always found them willing to give careful consideration to recommendations which were backed by sound reasons and would stand careful investigation. The habit of practically autocratic command doubtless develops some valuable traits of character, but conciliation and exposition are not among them. The man who always has his own way naturally loses the ability to convince those who are not his subordinates, and are not in awe of him, that his views are right. Indeed, there is danger that he may fall into the habit of thinking that a plan is meritorious just because he wants it. He loses the power of seeing that there are two sides to a case. It really seems as if something of this kind is true in the present instance. It is interesting as illustrating this well-recognized characteristic that, when the House Naval Committee asked Mr. Roosevelt to send some members of the Personnel Board to answer questions about its report, he did not select officers who had been in command for years but chose the two junior members. One of them was a young engineer, and it was repeatedly stated by different members of the Committee that he was the best wit-

ness they had ever had before them, because he could give a convincing reason for every answer he made.

When the criticisms of the existing system of naval administration are analyzed to their absolutely essential features, it seems to me that they concentrate into one point—the demand of certain line officers that the line of the Navy shall be put into such a position as to absolutely dominate it in every particular by such an organization as will make it impossible for any Chief of a Staff Bureau to go directly to the Secretary. As I believe I have shown, there is absolutely nothing in the talk about a majority of the Bureau Chiefs being staff officers, so far as that fact affects general naval policy and the action of the Secretary; and the preponderating influence of the Chief of Navigation is so great that it is safe to say that no reasonable proposition which he submits to the Secretary will ever be rejected. It would appear, therefore, that the essential purpose of the demand for a change is simply to confer absolute and complete control of every detail of naval administration upon line officers.

In the article in the REVIEW to which I have referred, much emphasis is naturally laid upon the point of preparation of plans of campaign, etc., as it is ostensibly to provide for this that the change in the system of naval administration is urged. It would seem that this is one of the functions of the Bureau of Navigation, which includes in its purview the movement of the fleet. There is no limit to the number of officers who may be ordered to duty under that Bureau, and its Chief is free to select the ablest officers of the entire service for this duty. He could, in fact, with the approval of the Secretary, exercise every function which a General Staff could fulfil, except one—control over the other Bureaus. To a certain extent his present authority does exercise a considerable control of this kind, for it is the Bureau of Navigation that decides which ships shall be sent on particular duty, and the Bureaus that deal with *materiel* have to conform to the programme of Navigation. I mention this only because the other article charged certain conditions which it considered defects to the Bureau System, while it seems to me the facts are that, if blame is chargeable to any one, it should be laid on Navigation, which has full authority, under law and regulation, to do these very things.

There is a great temptation to one who has spent over forty

years on the active list of the Navy, during most of which there was anything but good feeling between the different branches of the service, to become specific and point out instances of injustice; but I have tried to make this article impersonal as far as possible and to make it a discussion of systems and not of individuals. I will say, however, that the desirability of harmony certainly appeals to me most strongly, and I can truly say, as a result of all my experience, that the staff officers, of whom I was one until a few years ago, were most sincerely desirous of harmony. Who is responsible for the lack of it? This very article, to which I have referred, with its strictures upon a large class of officers, calling men who are a vital element of the Navy "non-military and non-combatant" is an excellent illustration of a main cause of the lack of harmony and shows clearly who is responsible. Fortunately for the credit of the service, the general public has no idea of the indignities which have been inflicted, time and again, upon the staff officers of the Navy by some—I am glad, indeed, to say not all—of those who would restrict to themselves the term "military" officers. Retaliation is simply impossible; the only recourse is an appeal for redress to the common head, the Secretary. It is this constant spirit of arrogance and domination by a relatively few very aggressive men that causes the lack of harmony. In this connection it is very noteworthy indeed that the most important legislation for the Navy which has been enacted in many years—namely, the Personnel Law of 1899—was a marked example of how ready Congress is to do things for the Navy when the officers are agreed in their recommendations. The harmony which did undoubtedly exist at that time was largely due to the tact and patience of Mr. Roosevelt, when Assistant Secretary, who brought about the appointment of the Personnel Board and through its sessions and deliberations led to the formulation of the report which was substantially the law as it finally appeared.

Let me say in conclusion that the last thought in my mind, in the preparation of this article, has been opposition to any demand by the line officers of the Navy for any reasonable modification of existing methods which will render their part of the naval administration more efficient. I have always believed, and my sixteen years' experience in the Navy Department confirmed the view, that, so long as it did not mean interference with the

legitimate work of others, it was a wise thing to grant the request of every zealous and progressive Bureau Chief for anything which would in his judgment increase the efficiency of his work. I feel very sure that the staff officers of the Navy do not dream for a moment of asking to be consulted about matters of strategy and tactics and similar things, which are not within their purview. They are willing that the line officers should have anything they want which will increase efficiency along these lines, provided that it does not relegate them to a distinctly inferior position and one where they would be prevented from having ready access to the Secretary.

Finally, I think there can be no doubt on the part of unprejudiced persons that the opinion generally prevailing throughout the country, that our naval administration is thoroughly efficient, is fully justified; and if there are any who have been disturbed in this view by the recent criticisms, I sincerely trust that the facts which I have presented will reassure them and that they will feel that the system of administration of naval affairs is entirely satisfactory and efficient and is being carried out by men of devoted patriotism.

GEORGE W. MELVILLE.